

Message Text

PAGE 01 TEL AV 03558 091442Z

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV3558

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PFOR, IS

SUBJECT: APPOINTMENT OF ARIEL (ARIK) SHARON AS GOI
ADVISER

REF: TEL AVIV 3298

SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER'S JUNE 1 SURPRISE ANNOUNCEMENT
OF HIS APPOINTMENT OF ARIEL (ARIK) SHARON AS "GENERAL
ADVISER" HAS BEEN MOST STRIKING DEVELOPMENT ON DOMESTIC
POLITICAL SCENE IN RECENT MONTHS. COMMENTATORS AND
POLITICIANS ARE FASCINATED AND TO SOME EXTENT BAFFLED
BY RABIN'S DECISION TO BRING CONTROVERSIAL, CHARISMATIC
OCTOBER WAR HERO AND OUTSPOKEN CRITIC OF GOI POLICY
LINE INTO HIS INNER CIRCLE. SOME BELIEVE THAT MAIN
MOTIVE IS PUBLIC-SPIRITED DESIRE TO UTILIZE SHARON'S
PROFESSIONAL MILITARY ABILITIES IN STRENGTHENING IDF.
OTHERS VIEW IT AS MOVE ON DOMESTIC POLITICAL CHESSBOARD,
WITH RABIN ENGAGING IN POWER PLAY AGAINST DEFENSE
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PAGE 02 TEL AV 03558 091442Z

MINISTER AND ARCHRIVAL SHIMON PERES. SHARON'S OWN
POLITICAL AMBITIONS ARE ALSO INVOLVED, AND THERE HAS
BEEN SPECULATION THAT SHARON REGARDS NEW POST MERELY AS
STEPPING STONE TO HIGHER OFFICE. THUS, WHILE MOST

OBSERVERS SEE APPOINTMENT IN SHORT TERM AS SHREWD MOVE BY WHICH RABIN HAS IMPROVED HIS POPULAR STANDING, THEY BELIEVE IT MAY YET BACKFIRE ON HIM AS OTHER POLITICAL PLAYERS, PARTICULARLY SHARON AND PERES, DECIDE ON THEIR OWN NEXT MOVES. END SUMMARY.

1. RABIN'S DECISION, APPARENTLY TAKEN WITHOUT CONSULTATION WITH THE GOI LEADERS, TO APPOINT RESERVE GENERAL AND FORMER LIKUD LEADER ARIEL (ARIK) SHARON AS HIS "GENERAL ADVISOR" HAS HIT DOMESTIC POLITICAL SCENE LIKE AN UNEXPECTED THUNDERBOLT. WE HAVE HEARD NUMEROUS VIEWS (NOT NECESSARILY DEFINITIVE ONES) AS TO REASONS FOR SHARON APPOINTMENT, MOST OF WHICH CAN BE SUBSUMED UNDER FOLLOWING TWO GENERAL HEADINGS: A) PROFESSIONAL MILITARY COMPETENCE AND B) INTERNAL POLITICAL MACHINATIONS.

2. THEORY OF PROFESSIONAL MILITARY COMPETENCE. RABIN, IT IS SAID, HAS REALIZED FOR SOME TIME DESIRABILITY OF RE-INVOLVING SHARON DIRECTLY IN REBUILDING POSTWAR ISRAELI ARMY. HE HAD FAVORED SHARON'S REINSTATEMENT SOME TIME AGO IN AN IDF COMMAND CAPACITY, BUT THIS HAD BEEN BLOCKED BY OBJECTION OF DEFENSE MINISTER PERES AND CHIEF OF STAFF GUR.

PROponents OF THIS THEORY NOTE THAT RABIN AND SHARON HAVE DEEP, LONGSTANDING PROFESSIONAL RESPECT FOR EACH OTHER. AS CHIEF OF STAFF, RABIN HAD PROMOTED SHARON TO RANK OF GENERAL. IN TURN, SHARON HAD VIGOROUSLY DEFENDED RABIN IN APRIL 1974 AGAINST CHARGES BY EX AIR FORCE CHIEF EZER WEIZMAN THAT RABIN HAD SUFFERED NERVOUS BREAKDOWN ON EVE OF SIX DAY WAR. COROLLARY OF THIS THEORY IS THAT RABIN WILL ATTEMPT TO KEEP SHARON'S ENERGIES FOCUSED ON IDF-RELATED ISSUES, AND WILL TRY TO MINIMIZE HIS INFLUENCE ON FOREIGN POLICY DECISIONS. RABIN, WE UNDERSTAND, IS NOT EXACTLY ENAMORED OF SHARON'S POLITICAL THEORIES WHICH ARE FAR REMOVED FROM GOVERNMENT POLICY.

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 TEL AV 03558 091442Z

3. THEORY OF INTERNAL POLITICAL MACHINATIONS. SHARON'S APPOINTMENT, IN THIS APPROACH, IS SEEN AS SHREWD MOVE BY WHICH RABIN HAS COOPTED INTO GOVERNING ESTABLISHMENT ONE OF HIS EVENTUAL RIVALS FOR PRIME MINISTERSHIP. SOME ISRAELIS BELIEVE APPOINTMENT ALST DMINISHEES POTENTIAL OF LIKUD AND HARDLINE ELEMENTS IN NATIONAL RELIGIOUS PARTY TO PROMOTE IDEA OF NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT, AND THAT IT WILL BE SOMEWHAT HARDER FOR THESE GROUPS TO CRITICIZE GOI POLICY NOW THAT ARIK IS MEMBER OF THE TEAM. ONE VIEW HOLDS THAT RABIN INTENDED APPOINTMENT TO DEFUSE LIKUD CRITICISMS OF GOI FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY. INITIAL REACTIONS OF LIKUD MEMBERS,

HOWEVER, SUGGEST THAT MOST OF THEM PARTICULARLY YOUNGER ELEMENTS, ARE DEEPLY DISAPPOINTED. OUR OWN TENTATIVE JUDGEMENT IS THAT LIKUD, RATHER THAN GAINING SOME NEW LEVERAGE ON GOI POLICY THROUGH BACKDOOR, HAS AT LEAST TEMPORARILY LOST ONE OF ITS "STAR PERFORMERS" IN ITS STALLED CAMPAIGN FOR UNITY GOVERNMENT.

4. MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, SHARON APPOINTMENT DEROGATES TO SOME EXTENT FROM STATURE AND AUTHORITY OF DEFENSE MINISTER PERES WHO, WITHIN RULING LABOR PARTY, IS WIDELY REGARDED AS ONLY SERIOUS POTENTIAL RIVAL FOR PRIME MINISTERSHIP. COMMENTATORS NOTE THAT, IN SHORT RUN, RABIN HAS GAINED CREDIT AMONG MORE HAWKISH ELEMENTS OF PUBLIC OPINION BY BRINGING CHARISMATIC AND POPULAR SHARON INTO HIS TEAM DESPITE DISCOMFITURE OF PERES AND GUR, AND THUS HAS STRENGTHENED HIS OWN POLITICAL BASE. MOST IMMEDIATE RESULT OF APPOINTMENT, IN FACT, HAS BEEN TO BRING TO SURFACE LATENT BUT CHRONIC TENSIONS BETWEEN RABIN AND PERES, UNDERSCORING REALITY THAT THEY ARE POLITICAL RIVALS AS WELL AS CABINET COLLEAGUES. EYE-WITNESSES HAVE TOLD US THAT PERES WAS FURIOUS ON HEARING OF APPOINTMENT, AND THAT AT JUNE 3 LABOR ALIGNMENT KNESSET FACTION MEETING HE HEAPED RIDICULE ON SHARON'S POLITICAL VIEWS (PARTICULARLY RE PLO AND HUSSEIN). PERES ALSO HAS MADE NO SECRET OF HIS SATISFACTION THAT LATEST OPINION POLLS RELEASED LAST WEEK STILL SHOW HIM ENJOYING VIRTUALLY TWICE AS MUCH PUBLIC BACKING AS RABIN.

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 TEL AV 03558 091442Z

5. POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS. THERE IS CONSIDERABLE UNCERTAINTY AS TO POSSIBLE LONGER TERM IMPLICATIONS OF SHARON APPOINTMENT. SOME POLITICAL OBSERVERS ARE INCREDULOUS THAT RABIN COULD INVITE POTENTIAL POLITICAL NEMESIS INTO HIS INNER CIRCLE ALONE AND FORMER INFORMATION MINISTER YARIV PRIVATELY HAVE CALLED IT "FLABBERGASTING"; DAVAR EDITOR ZEMER SAID "IT PROVES HE STILL HAS A LOT TO LEARN; MINTRANS YAACOBİ TOLD US HE COUNSELED RABIN AGAINST MOVE); OTHERS ARE ALREADY FOCUSSED ON POWER PLAY BETWEEN RABIN, PERES AND SHARON. HAARETZ' MILITARY CORRESPONDENT BELIEVES THAT SHARON REGARDS NEW POSITION MERELY AS STEPPING STONE TO HIGHER AMBITIONS--CHIEF OF STAFF OR DEFENSE MINISTER AND EVENTUALLY PRIME MINISTER. ANOTHER COMMENTATOR HOLDS THAT RABIN-SHARON RELATIONSHIP WILL INEVITABLY COLLAPSE, AND THAT AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS SHARON WILL RESIGN TO LAUNCH WITH RENewed VIGOR POLITICAL CAMPAIGN TO BUILD RIGHTWING POLITICAL COALITION AGAINST LABOR ALIGNMENT.

6. COMMENT: AT THIS STAGE, WE CANNOT UNTANGLE ALL RIDDLES OF SHARON APPOINTMENT. RABIN'S OBJECTIVES

AND MOTIVATIONS SEEM TO BE COMPLEX AND PERHAPS NOT
ENTIRELY CONSISTENT. WHILE IN SHORT TERM HE MIGHT
SEEM TO HAVE SCORED IMAGINATIVE COUP, APPOINTMENT
MAY YET BOOMERANG ON HIM⁹ MOREOVER, CLEAR REBUF
TO PERES AND GUR IS CERTAIN NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN;
POSITIN OF BOTH ON DMOESTIC SCENE IS TEMPORARILY
WEAKEND,AND THEY WILL BE LOOKING FOR CHANCE TO HAVE
THEIR INNING. FINALLY, IT IS UNCLEAR WHAT, IF
ANY, INFLUENCE SHARON WILL HAVE ON FORMULATION OF GOI
POLICY ON NEGOTIATING ISSUES.
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